

If anticipating the flurry of Christmas activities leaves you yearning for something more, consider focusing on some Advent practices that encourage you to wait patiently and prepare joyfully for Christ's coming.

D. BRENT LAYTHAM



The Strong Bracing Season of Advent

Advent have I loved, but Christmas have I hated. Not really, of course, but sometimes I almost feel that way. Have you ever been a bit disappointed with Christmas, asking yourself around three o'clock on December 25 whether "glory to God in the highest" shouldn't last just a little longer? Or thinking, in that brief interval between opening the last present and breaking the first one, "Surely the Word became flesh for something bigger than this."

No doubt all of us have thought, once or twice, that Christmas should be more holy and more significant. That it should stick to our ribs like mashed potatoes rather than melt like cotton candy.

What we need is not a technique to "put Christ back into Christmas," but the strong, bracing season of Advent. Advent is the church's annual invitation to wait patiently and prepare joyfully for the comings of Christ. Our Advent Scriptures call us to "wait for

the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7), and to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Luke 3:4). Waiting and preparing are neither natural nor easy, but they are absolutely necessary if we are to become the holy people that God intends.

Let's begin with waiting. I'm not good at waiting: you should see me in a traffic jam or a grocery line. But waiting is hard for everybody. Ask a child waiting for Christmas, or someone on the liver transplant list, or the parent of a runaway. Waiting is hard.

It's harder still in our culture, which lives for instant gratification. The "get it now" logic of our marketplace can overwhelm patient waiting in our churches. How quickly do we drop Advent singing for Christmas carols? Of course, the church year isn't law, and singing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" before Christmas is no sin, but it may indicate that as a people we have lost confidence in patience, and lost

patience with waiting.

But patience is exactly what we need to wait faithfully "until the coming of the Lord" (James 5:7), since our Lord's return has taken thousands more years than expected. "With the Lord...a thousand years are like one day" (2 Peter 3:8). But still, it has been long enough to forget that we "wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:13). Long enough to get complacent about a Lord who never arrives, and to negotiate pacts of non-aggression with injustice and hunger and sin. So we lose patience and quit waiting for Christ to return and mend the world. Why work at waiting when we can have chocolate truffles and watch *The Office* online right now?

The best way to learn how to wait patiently and watchfully for the coming of Christ is not by sitting still and doing nothing, but by faithfully using a series

D. Brent Laytham is associate professor of theology and ethics at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.

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of Advent practices. First, there is what my young friend Hannah calls “the Advent song”—“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Her family sings the first verse at every meal during Advent, weaving together Sunday worship with weekday discipleship, singing themselves into God’s patient, joyful, hopeful Israel. To some people its minor key and restrained joy seem a bitter pill to swallow, what with Santa ho ho-ing at the mall and Bing singing “White Christmas” on the radio. But we can acquire a taste for this song’s mood and meaning the same way we can acquire a taste for asparagus or daily exercise. Why bother? Because this song teaches the restraint of joyful longing and the reality of exilic expectation.

“Joyful longing” probably sounds like an oxymoron, since we hate to wait but love to party. But the church should wait with joyful longing for the second coming of its Lord like Israel waiting with joyful longing for his first coming. So we sing ourselves into the story, learning that rejoicing doesn’t start when waiting ends, but begins already in the certainty that “Emmanuel *shall* come to thee, O Israel.” The promise is so sure that we rejoice already, even as we long for its fulfillment.

We also need a good dose of “O Come, O Come” to learn how to live as expectant exiles. No matter how settled we feel, no matter how stable our jobs, no matter how deeply worn the ruts of our life—Christians live in “lonely exile here.” Our true home is not this groaning creation, but this creation renewed by Christ’s return. So while the rest of the world jumps the gun on Christmas celebration, the church should boldly keep singing “O Come, O Come” and our other Advent hymns too (*Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* 120-46, 768-73).

Lighting the Advent wreath in Sunday worship and at family meals teaches us to wait. One of my favorite

intergenerational activities is to gather on the first Sunday of Advent (this year November 30) to make Advent wreaths together. All you need to make Advent’s best tool is a wreath form, four candles, and a little trust that rituals are good for us. Surely December is an easy time to recognize that ritual—repeated meaningful action—is good for us. From the way we cook a favorite holiday dish to the order in which we decorate the tree, most of us feel the power of ordered action to evoke memory and expectation, or to express love and fidelity. The Advent wreath does all that by using growing light (light one more candle each week) to anticipate the Christmas celebration of Christ’s first coming, the expectation that the world’s Light is coming again in glory. Add to that powerful scriptural texts (see sidebar), and the wreath fires our imaginations and schools our desires toward the comings of Christ.

So use the wreath in your worship at church and at home, but refuse to over-symbolize it. Individual candles don’t mean specific things like peace, hope, joy, and love (or shepherds, angels, inhospitable innkeepers, and lowing cattle). Purple only means royalty because purple dye used to be the priciest color of all, and while a circular wreath might make you think of eternity, it mainly makes me dizzy (and besides, in some traditions the candles are arranged in a straight line). You don’t need a pink candle for the third Sunday unless your pastor wears a pink stole that day, and you definitely don’t need long speeches about what we’re doing. The point of ritual is to do it, not to talk it to death. So read the Scripture verses, light the candles, and let the significance of it all shine through by its own power.

Advent calendars are common enough that I’ll say very little about them here, except that the secular ones don’t make us better disciples. A piece

of chocolate a day is pleasant enough, but it doesn’t deepen my commitment to justice. The Care Bears Advent calendar is probably cute, but it doesn’t draw us into the saving story of Christ’s comings. (The absolutely best Advent calendar I’ve ever seen is called “Fling Wide the Doors,” available through the Liturgy Training Publications website.) Whichever calendar you use, the point is to learn the joy of waiting on the Lord.

Besides waiting, Advent also teaches us to “prepare the way of the Lord.” It does this first by reminding us that the Lord’s way is a path of peace. One Advent when my daughter Monica was four, she looked up from playing to ask, “Daddy, when people stop killing each other we won’t need Advent anymore, will we?” She was exactly right, because the real end to all violence will arrive with the coming of the Prince of Peace, as nations “beat their swords into plowshares” (Isaiah 2:4) and Christ guides “our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79), and because Advent calls us to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8), allowing God to adorn our lives with righteousness (Isaiah 61:8-11).

The problem with an Advent call to prepare for justice is that we are so consumed with preparations for Christmas—the listing, shopping, buying, wrapping, decorating, etc.—that we lack the time, energy, and especially the attentiveness to prepare for the coming of Christ’s kingdom of justice and peace. Sure, we put something in the Salvation Army kettle, but December is not usually a time when we give our undivided attention to Mary’s claim that her son “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53).

The most central practice for allowing God to recapture our attention in a way that reshapes our living is to hear and meditate on Scripture. Specifically we can read the Advent lessons in Sunday worship and in daily devotions (see sidebar). All the biblical quotations used for this article are from the three years of Advent texts. What I've discovered is that the coming of the Messiah is about bringing forth a glorious justice that sets the world right.

So our work is not to bring the kingdom, but we are called to prepare for and participate in its coming. We prepare by learning to see the real needs of our neighbors, to hear the real cries of the oppressed, and to recognize the manifold ways that the kingdoms of this world are not yet the righteous kingdom of our Lord. And seeing need we serve; hearing the oppressed we help; recognizing injustice—in ourselves and our society—we resist it with all God's strength.

One Advent practice that might sensitize us to our work of preparation is the neighborhood walk. Try to do this one with fellow Christians, whether your family or a group from church. Take a deliberate stroll through your neighborhood (either where you live or where your church is located), asking God to open your eyes to places where Jesus wants to “defend the cause of the poor...give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor” (Psalm 72:4). Prayed sincerely and walked honestly, this practice will prove transforming.

Another Advent practice might seem trivial—giving small gifts on Saint Nicholas Day (December 6). Since our children were toddlers, they have put out a shoe at bedtime on December 5, and found in it the next morning a small gift (under \$5) put there by their parents in honor of Bishop Nicholas of Myra. Nicholas lived his life as a pointer to justice: he gave his possessions to the poor when he became a priest; he ransomed three sisters from a life of prostitution (a wonderful example for

Covenanters committed to “break the chains” of sex trafficking); and legend says he used to leave gifts for the needy during the night.

Our children have taken delight in their gifts, but even more they have delighted in Nicholas's holy living. Celebrating his feast day calls us to resist consumerist versions of Christmas and to embrace the poor and needy in our midst. Saint Nicholas is an example of how to prepare for the coming of Christ's righteous kingdom.

The final Advent practice is patient decoration. It is hard to recognize and keep Advent as a season if the Christmas tree goes up the day after Thanksgiving. There is one way to begin decorating for Christmas in the spirit of Advent preparation: take the entire season of Advent to finally assemble your nativity scene.

In churches I pastored, we used to put the animals and empty manger under the altar table, and use our children's sermon each week to slowly bring Mary and Joseph from the extremities of the sanctuary all the way to the stable. The children loved the slow process of preparing the crèche for Jesus's arrival on Christmas Eve, learning a bit of Advent patience along the way. We do the same thing at our house, moving pieces every day. (And the wise men require even more patience, waiting until Epiphany on January 6.)

All that playing with ceramic figurines might sound trivial to you, but it requires intentionality, patience, and hope. Surely these are exactly what we need if God is to adorn our lives with compassion, mercy, and justice: intentionality about the process, patience about the pace, and hope that the goal will finally arrive and not disappoint.

A well kept Advent won't disappoint, and neither will the Christmas that follows. Instead, both will draw us ever closer to our coming King. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Maranatha! □

Scripture Readings for Lighting Advent Candles

(From *The Covenant Book of Worship*)

As you light the candles each week, introduce the Scripture readings with the following:

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ. Advent means coming. We are preparing ourselves for the days...

On the First Sunday of Advent, from Isaiah 2:4:

When the nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

On the Second Sunday of Advent, from Isaiah 11:6:

The world shall dwell with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

On the Third Sunday of Advent, from Isaiah 35:1-2:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, from Isaiah 7:14b:

The Lord will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (God with us). Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

On Christmas Eve or on Christmas Day, from Isaiah 9:2:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined. Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Advent Texts for 2008

First Sunday of Advent November 30

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Second Sunday of Advent, December 7

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Third Sunday of Advent December 14

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:47-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38 □